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Published: Sep 11, 2007 - 11:54:15 pm EDT

Report lauds rescue workers: Volunteers save state about \$185 million per year

By George Mast, Delaware State News

DOVER — A report released Tuesday by the state auditor's office says Delaware's volunteer rescue workers save more than the taxpayers' lives.

The annual report, released to coincide with the ongoing Delaware Volunteer Firemen's Association conference, listed that it would cost approximately \$185 million per year to replace the state's volunteer fire and ambulance service with an employed statewide service.

For the average taxpayer this would mean a property tax increase of \$7.64 per \$1,000 of the assessed value of their house.

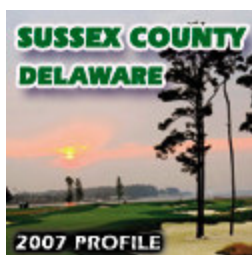
"Ultimately, Delaware prides itself on its volunteer fire companies and the service that they get from volunteers," said Nick Adams, assistant to the State Auditor R. Thomas Wagner Jr.

"That's why we do this report, to kind of shed some light on that to say, 'Hey, these volunteers, not only do they risk their life but they save the state quite a bit of money,'"



Delaware's volunteer rescue workers, such as the members of Smyrna's Citizens' Hose Co. above, save the state about \$185 million per year, according to a state auditor's office report released Tuesday. Delaware State News/Dave Chambers





The report uses Wilmington's employed fire and ambulance service as a model for the projected costs if a identical method was used for the entire state.

The report assumes 25 people would be needed for each station at the approximate \$92,000 total compensation, including benefits, the average Wilmington fire service employee receives.

According to the report, an additional 1,875 employees would be needed if the state switched to a paid service. For the past few years the number of active volunteers in the state has been listed at around 4,500.

Kevin Wilson, chairman of this year's volunteer firemen's conference, which is being held throughout the week in Dover, said despite the increasing struggle to recruit new volunteers he does not expect to see the day when Delaware would ever need to completely switch to a fully employed fire service.

What Mr. Wilson said he does anticipate is more stations hiring a few staff members to supplement their core of volunteers. In most cases the paid staff would be ambulance personnel as they receive the most emergency calls.

Additional employees would add to the current \$36.7 million the state's volunteer service receives from grants, county subsidies and insurance tax but wouldn't compare to the costs of switching completely, he said.

"(Fire and ambulance service) may cost a few more dollars in the future but it's still going to be well worth it and still going to be a tremendous value," Mr. Wilson said.

He said, while it does feel good to know the services they perform are worth so much money, the financial numbers really aren't important to many of the volunteers.

"The average volunteer firefighter has no idea that figure even exists," Mr. Wilson said.

In the same light, neither do the average taxpayers they protect, he said.

Mr. Wilson said many people's perspective seems to be that, "When I dial 911, if somebody shows up (the associated cost) doesn't really matter to me."

Staff writer George Mast

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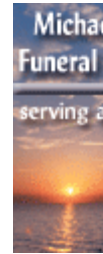
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